

Realist voters in democratic politics: motivated reasoning or rational trade-offs?

Mafalda Pratas

European University Institute

June 26, 2025

Motivation

1. Political scientists and politicians have recently converged on “realist” view of voter behavior (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Lucas et al., 2024).
2. Many believe in the prevalence of blind retrospective voting, partisan motivated-reasoning, identity-based voting, voters’ ignorance, voters’ myopia.
3. Result: breakdown of electoral accountability → Democracy does not work as intended.
4. My argument: voters are not as irrational as recent scholarship suggests. Rather, many voters understand the trade-offs and electoral dilemmas they face.

Why does accountability break down?

Current answers:

1. Voters do not have sufficient levels of information.
2. Voters have information, but they suffer from cognitive and behavioral biases.
 - ▶ Recency bias
 - ▶ Bias in information acquisition (information sources)
 - ▶ Bias in information processing
 - ▶ Biased responsibility attribution
 - ▶ Partisan-motivated reasoning

Partisan motivated-reasoning

1. Partisan motivated reasoning is a type of directionally motivated reasoning \neq accuracy motivated reasoning.

Partisan motivated-reasoning

1. Partisan motivated reasoning is a type of directionally motivated reasoning \neq accuracy motivated reasoning.
2. Individuals reject new information that contradicts their prior beliefs, group ties, identity, or group sympathies (and dislike).

Partisan motivated-reasoning

1. Partisan motivated reasoning is a type of directionally motivated reasoning \neq accuracy motivated reasoning.
2. Individuals reject new information that contradicts their prior beliefs, group ties, identity, or group sympathies (and dislike).
3. Even when they accept information, they may attribute blame and responsibility in ways that protect their prior beliefs and group ties.

Partisan motivated-reasoning

1. Partisan motivated reasoning is a type of directionally motivated reasoning \neq accuracy motivated reasoning.
2. Individuals reject new information that contradicts their prior beliefs, group ties, identity, or group sympathies (and dislike).
3. Even when they accept information, they may attribute blame and responsibility in ways that protect their prior beliefs and group ties.
4. Common cause of failures of accountability. (Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; Healy and Malhotra, 2013; Bisgaard, 2015, 2019; de Vries and Solaz, 2017; Freeder, 2019; Little et al., 2022; Krishnarajan, 2023; Bonilla, 2024)

Partisan motivated-reasoning *versus* choice

1. Some voters may be motivated reasoners and biased. But...

Partisan motivated-reasoning *versus* choice

1. Some voters may be motivated reasoners and biased. But...
2. Voters are also constrained by the menu choice that they are offered at election time (Sniderman and Levendusky, 2009; Stone, 2017).

Partisan motivated-reasoning *versus* choice

1. Some voters may be motivated reasoners and biased. But...
2. Voters are also constrained by the menu choice that they are offered at election time (Sniderman and Levendusky, 2009; Stone, 2017).
3. Voters are not simply evaluating an incumbent in isolation or against an ideal politician. They face a choice between alternative candidates/parties.

Partisan motivated-reasoning *versus* choice

1. Some voters may be motivated reasoners and biased. But...
2. Voters are also constrained by the menu choice that they are offered at election time (Sniderman and Levendusky, 2009; Stone, 2017).
3. Voters are not simply evaluating an incumbent in isolation or against an ideal politician. They face a choice between alternative candidates/parties.
4. Counterfactual question: if the same voters with same political preferences were not motivated reasoners and had access to complete unbiased information, would they vote differently?

Electoral dilemmas and rational trade-offs

- Researchers have overemphasized the role of partisan motivated reasoning, biased performance evaluations, and biased responsibility attribution.

Electoral dilemmas and rational trade-offs

- Researchers have overemphasized the role of partisan motivated reasoning, biased performance evaluations, and biased responsibility attribution.
- Many voters correctly perceive (bad) incumbent quality, but they *rationally forgo accountability*. They make voluntary and rational trade-offs.

Electoral dilemmas and rational trade-offs

- Researchers have overemphasized the role of partisan motivated reasoning, biased performance evaluations, and biased responsibility attribution.
- Many voters correctly perceive (bad) incumbent quality, but they *rationally forgo accountability*. They make voluntary and rational trade-offs.
- These voters vote for incumbents that they know are suboptimal in valence, but fulfill their preferences on ideology, policy, or partisan representation.

Electoral dilemmas and rational trade-offs

Electoral dilemmas: when closest candidate on ideology is the worst on valence, voters cannot simultaneously fulfill all desirable goals.

They will either forgo accountability or they will forgo ideological/policy representation.

Electoral dilemmas and rational trade-offs

Electoral dilemmas: when closest candidate on ideology is the worst on valence, voters cannot simultaneously fulfill all desirable goals.

They will either forgo accountability or they will forgo ideological/policy representation.

	Ideologically Closest	Ideologically Distant
Good Performance	✓	
Bad Performance		✗

Empirical Strategy

1. Original survey in 3 countries (United States, United Kingdom, Spain; $N = 3 \times 1,400 = 4200$).
2. Survey with embedded experiments.
3. Candidate vignettes: voters see two hypothetical candidates from opposing parties. Forced choice.
4. Incumbent candidates vary along two dimensions: Performance (Good/Bad) and Partisan environment (Partisan/Non-partisan).

Empirical Strategy

1. Do not simply ask hypothetical vote choice or performance evaluation. Ask both: explicitly allow voters to *separate* vote choice from performance evaluation.

Empirical Strategy

1. Do not simply ask hypothetical vote choice or performance evaluation. Ask both: explicitly allow voters to *separate* vote choice from performance evaluation.
2. After asking hypothetical vote choice, ask respondents about incumbent quality *regardless of how they voted*.

Empirical Strategy

1. Do not simply ask hypothetical vote choice or performance evaluation. Ask both: explicitly allow voters to *separate* vote choice from performance evaluation.
2. After asking hypothetical vote choice, ask respondents about incumbent quality *regardless of how they voted*.
3. If my hypothesis is correct, many voters will **correctly assess incumbent quality in partisan environments**, but **still vote** for their preferred party.

Empirical Strategy

1. Do not simply ask hypothetical vote choice or performance evaluation. Ask both: explicitly allow voters to *separate* vote choice from performance evaluation.
2. After asking hypothetical vote choice, ask respondents about incumbent quality *regardless of how they voted*.
3. If my hypothesis is correct, many voters will **correctly assess incumbent quality in partisan environments**, but **still vote** for their preferred party.

Empirical Strategy

1. Reduction in accountability in partisan environments persists even among **non-rationalizers**.

Empirical Strategy

1. Reduction in accountability in partisan environments persists even among **non-rationalizers**.
2. Further implication: as candidate policy distance (polarization) increases, more voters will forgo accountability.

Rationalizers: Partisan vs. Non-partisan environments

	United Kingdom	United States	Spain	Overall
Rationalizers (partisan env.)	10.54	10.27	8.73	9.85
Rationalizers (non-partisan env.)	7.75	9.97	9.32	9.01
Difference	2.80	0.30	0.59	0.84
(p-value)	(0.067)	(0.85)	(0.70)	(0.35)

Table 15: Percentage of rationalizers in partisan versus non-partisan environments.

Rationalizers: Co-partisans vs. Non co-partisans

	United Kingdom	United States	Spain	Overall
Co-partisan	5.66	12.65	8.33	9.15
Not co-partisan	12.65	8.95	8.86	10.16
Difference	-10.54	3.70	0.73	1.01
(p-value)	(0.005)	(0.12)	(0.83)	(0.47)

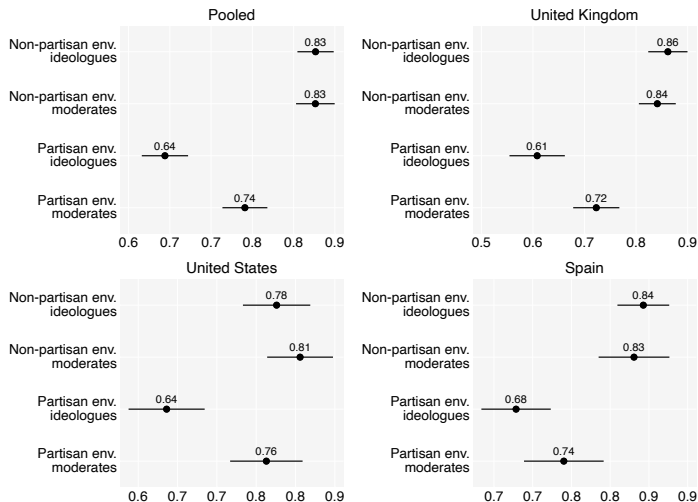
Table 16: Percentage of rationalizers in partisan environments. Good and bad incumbents. Differences between co-partisans and non-copartisans of the incumbent.

Rationalizers: Co-partisans vs. Non co-partisans (Bad incumbents only)

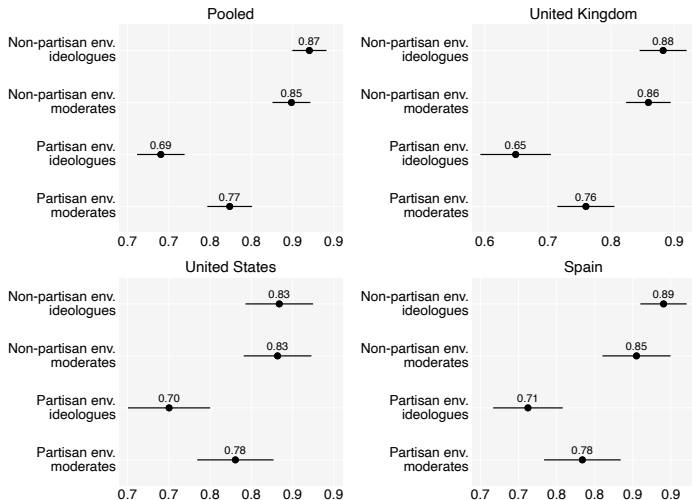
	United Kingdom	United States	Spain	Overall
Co-partisan	10.98	23.44	15.07	17.11
Not co-partisan	11.11	11.59	4.81	8.98
Difference	-0.43	11.85	10.25	8.12
(p-value)	(0.91)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.0002)

Table 17: Percentage of rationalizers in partisan environments. Bad incumbents only. Differences between co-partisans and non co-partisans of the incumbent.

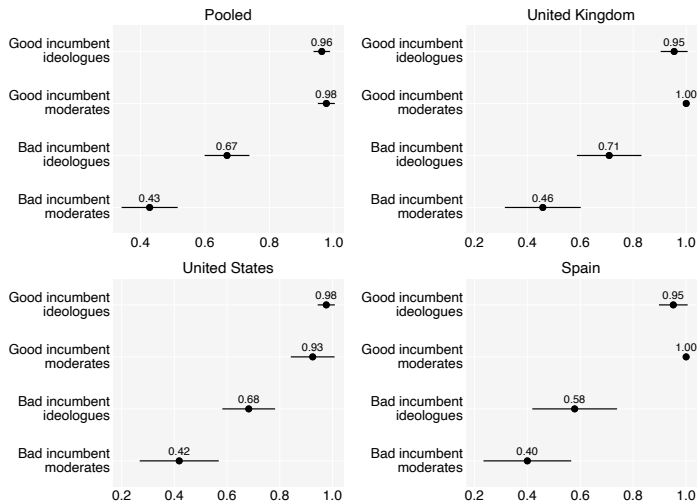
Baseline results: Rates of accountability



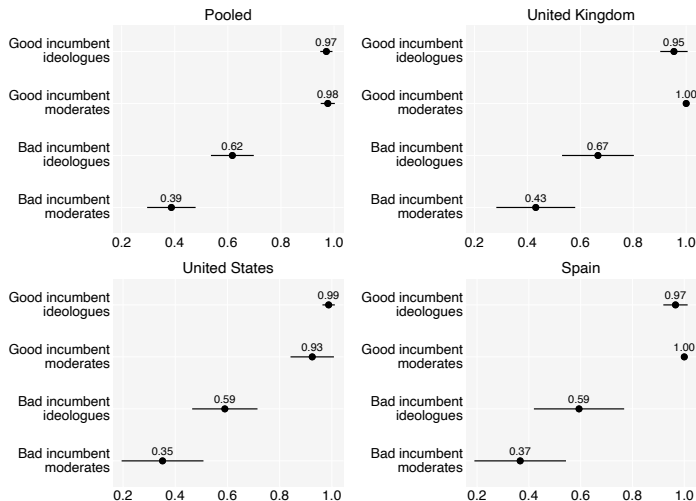
Baseline results: Rates of accountability among non-rationalizers



Baseline results: Incumbent vote-share among co-partisans



Baseline results: Incumbent vote-share among co-partisans non-rationalizers



Further work

- Polarization makes electoral dilemmas harder.
- Compare polarized vs. non-polarized electoral races (ideological distance between candidates)
- Differences in levels of rationalization and rates of accountability.
- If rates of accountability decrease in polarized settings, but rates of motivated reasoning do not increase (as much), then rational trade-offs.
- Qualitative evidence and text analysis of open-ended

Comments welcome!

What evidence would you need to be convinced?